

Pernicious Prophecy

LAWRENCE M. STRATTON

For over a century, the subject of peace in Palestine has been the focus of an endless stream of manifestos, declarations, agreements, letters of understanding, commissions, mandates, white papers, inquiries, reports, U.N. resolutions, charters, peace accords, and so forth. Walter Laqueur's *Israel-Arab Reader* contains over 150 such documents, for example.¹ People opining on the subject should note that even someone with the wisdom of Solomon, such as Solomon himself, had trouble bringing long-term stability to the region. Journalist Arnaud de Borchgrave has soberly observed that "An optimist in the Middle East is someone who is almost always wrong while a pessimist is usually an optimist with experience."²

Robert O. Smith's important presentation, "Palestinian Christians and Nationalism(s): Religious and Secular," describes the valuable leavening role of Palestinian Christian communities. Seeking to take "Jesus' call to be ministers of reconciliation" seriously, Palestinian Christians are promoting peace between Jews and Arab Muslims in the troubled region (20). For example, Smith chronicles Munib Younan's "trialogue" discussion programs between Jews, Muslims, and Christians. Younan's goal has been to seek interfaith "peace education, based on tolerance, equality, and forgiveness" (20-21). This quest for a longstanding and just peace within the region provides a powerful hope.

Whereas the Christians in Palestine that Smith describes have provided a leavening influence on the whole land, many American Christians have inflamed Middle East tensions under the banner of "Christian Zionism," an ideology that approaches the Middle East crisis, "through Armaged-

¹ Walter Laqueur and Barry Rubin, eds., *The Israel-Arab Reader: A Documentary History of the Middle East Conflict* 6th ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2001).

² Arnaud de Borchgrave, "Iraqi Palmistry," *Washington Times*, 3 February 2005, A19.

don scenarios.”³ (Christian Zionism arises from the theological rubric of dispensationalism that divides history into separate covenants that culminate in Armageddon.)⁴ As described by Roman Catholic ethicist John T. Pawlikowski, Christian Zionists not only “take a totally uncritical moral posture on the Palestinian-Israeli situation, [but] believe that the Israelis, as representatives of the forces of good fighting ultimately against the Devil, can do no wrong.”⁵ Pawlikowski, who is a member of the both the Roman Catholic and National Council of Churches committees on Jewish-Christian relations, adds that “They conceive of the state of Israel in such an exclusively theological fashion that the Palestinians are reduced to mere pawns in the apocalyptic drama.”⁶ By chronicling the pastoral endeavors of Palestinian Christians, Smith’s presentation challenges the indifference of many American Christians to their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Smith’s positive portrayal of Palestinian Christians who seek liberation from oppression enters into what can be treacherous rhetorical territory. To question Israeli actions and policy regarding Palestinians is often a taboo. Neoconservative theorist Norman Podhoretz labels all interpretations of the “war on terror” which question Israeli treatment of the Palestinians as “anti-Semitic canards.”⁷ In a speech marking the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon similarly assailed as “anti-Semites” those who criticize, what he calls, “The legitimate self-defense measures which Israel takes in its war against Palestinian terror.”⁸

3 John T. Pawlikowski, “Ethical Issues in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” in Rosemary Radford Ruether and Marc H., eds. *Beyond Occupation: American Jewish, Christian, and Palestinian Voice for Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 160.

4 In 1944, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church condemned dispensationalism as being “out of accord” with the Church’s confessions of faith. See, “Eschatology: Section Appendix—Report on Dispensationalism (1944 GA)” <http://www.pcusa.org/today/archive/believe/wp9901h.htm> (Accessed: April 4, 2005).

5 Pawlikowski, “Ethical Issues in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” 160.

6 Ibid.

7 Norman Podhoretz, “World War IV: How It Started, What It Means, and Why We Have to Win.” *Commentary*, September 2004, 32-33.

8 Ariel Sharon, “Remarks by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to the Israeli Knesset, Marking the Struggle Against Anti-Semitism” (Prime Minister’s Bureau, Jerusalem) Federal News Service, 26 January 2005.

Smith rises above ancient power struggles when he quotes Mitri Raheb, an ecumenical delegate to the 2004 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Raheb states: “Christian hope does not surrender to the forces of death and despair but challenges them.” Sparking condemnation, the Presbyterian denominational gathering that Raheb attended decided to initiate a process of selective disinvestment from corporations operating in Israel and the occupied territories as a non-violent economic strategy of resistance to pressure Israel to uphold Palestinian dignity.⁹ Harvard law professor Alan M. Dershowitz responded to the divestment resolution by stating that “The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has committed a grievous sin.”¹⁰ Conservative pundit Dennis Prager accused the PCUSA of “committing evil.”¹¹ Prager charged: “In the name of Jesus, it has called for the economic strangulation of Israel.”¹²

Lost in the fray over the disinvestment policy, which also attracted the attention of the *New York Times*,¹³ a second and perhaps more significant and worthwhile Presbyterian General Assembly resolution condemned Christian Zionism on the grounds that it erroneously links biblical faithfulness to absolute support of the modern state of Israel as part of a “prophetic end-time countdown.”¹⁴ The resolution also warned that “Since the crisis of 9/11, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, it has been easy to persuade the public that history is unraveling precisely as Dispensationalism predicted.”¹⁵

The Presbyterian condemnation of Christian Zionism serves the vital purpose of disconnecting general humanitarian support for both Pales-

9 216th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) “General Assembly Action: Resolution on Israel and Palestine” <http://www.pcusa.org/worldwide/israelpalestine/israelpalestineresolution.htm> (Accessed: April 4, 2005).

10 Alan M. Dershowitz, “Presbyterians’ Shameful Boycott,” *Los Angeles Times*, 4 August 2004.

11 Dennis Prager, “Presbyterian Church Defames Christianity,” *Creators’ Syndicate*, 20 July 2004.

12 Ibid.

13 Neela Banerjee. “Presbyterians and Jews to Meet on Mideast,” *New York Times*, 28 September 2004, 14; Neela Banerjee. “Jews Trying to Avert Protestant Divestment,” *New York Times*, 29 September 2004, 19.

14 216th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), “General Assembly Action: Resolution on Confronting Christian Zionism” <http://www.pcusa.org/worldwide/israelpalestine/christianzionism.htm> (Accessed: April 4, 2005).

15 Ibid.

tinians and Israelis from one-sided and erroneous Biblical presumptions in favor of Israel. Christian ethicist Ronald Stone has written that both Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich were Zionists in the sense that as Christian thinkers they supported the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 as a refuge for Jewish Holocaust survivors and as a state committed to Western-style democracy. However, Stone writes, neither Niebuhr nor Tillich viewed the founding of Israel as a fulfillment of any biblical promise.¹⁶

Cornel West has validly criticized Niebuhr for his indifferent defense of “the subordination” of Palestinians upon Israel’s founding.¹⁷ But it is significant that by freeing his Zionist sentiments from alleged biblical prophecy, Niebuhr was able to write in one of his last published references to Israel in 1958 that “pro-Zionist” Christians like himself are “as embarrassed as anti-Zionist religious Jews when Messianic claims are used to substantiate the right of the Jews to the particular homeland in Palestine; or when it is assumed that this can be done without injury to the Arabs.”¹⁸

Modern Christian Zionists such as *Left Behind* series author Timothy LaHaye, Jerry Falwell, D. James Kennedy, and Hal Lindsey, among others, promulgate widely held ideas about Armageddon and the wafting of “true” Christian believers into heaven during the so-called “Rapture.”¹⁹ As English journalist George Manbiot has documented, these dispensationalist interpretations of various biblical passages are driving aspects of American Middle East policy.²⁰ Such Christian Zionists lack Niebuhr’s modicum

16 Ronald H. Stone, *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr: A Mentor to the Twentieth Century* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 262; Mary Ann Stenger and Ronald H. Stone, *Dialogues of Paul Tillich* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2002), 61.

17 Cornel West, *Prophetic Fragments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 151.

18 Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Relations of Christians and Jews in Western Civilization,” in Reinhold Niebuhr, *Pious and Secular America* (New York: Scribner’s, 1958), 109.

19 See, Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2004).

20 George Manbiot, “Their beliefs are bonkers, but they are at the heart of power: U.S. Christian fundamentalists are driving Bush’s Middle East policy,” *The Guardian*, 20 April 2004. See also, Bill Broadway, “The Evangelical-Israeli Connection: Scripture Inspires Many Christians to Support Zionism Politically, Financially,” *Washington Post*, 27 March 2004, B9; “Meet the New Zionists,” *The Guardian*, 28 October 2002, 2; Michael Freund, “U.S. Christians Lobby against Gaza Retreat,” *Jerusalem Post*, 9 April 2004, 2; Martin E. Marty, “Bound by Belief,” *New York Times*, 15 April 2000, A23; Alison Mitchell, “Mideast Turmoil: The Conservatives, Israel Winning Broad Support from U.S. Right,” *New York Times*, 21 April 2002, 1; Peter Beinart, “Does the Christian Right Understand Zionism?” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 19 May 2002, E4; Jonathan Rosenblum, “American Christians Care More than

of Christian realism regarding Israel and Palestine and are indifferent to any “injury to the Arabs.”

Historian Ernest Sandeen has observed that although late nineteenth-century Princeton Theological Seminary scholars such as Charles Hodge and B.B. Warfield strongly disagreed with dispensationalism because they saw it as being biblically unsupported, their mutual opposition to “the common Modernist foe” kept the Old Princeton theologians “at peace” with the dispensationalists.²¹ History might have unfolded differently had the Old Princeton theologians instead joined the “Modernists” against dispensationalists such as English preacher John Nelson Darby who invented the term rapture, former Confederate army soldier and *Scofield Reference Bible* editor Cyrus L. Scofield, and evangelists Dwight L. Moody and William Eugene Blackstone.²² Like the early twenty-first century webmasters at “www.raptureready.com” who update each day’s “rapture index,”²³ Blackstone, the author of the influential 1878 bestseller, *Jesus is Coming*, argued that Zionist immigration to Palestine demonstrated that Israel is “God’s sundial,” revealing the imminence of Christ’s return.²⁴

In June 1971, 1,200 evangelical Protestants from 32 countries gathered in Jerusalem. In the aftermath of the 1967 Israeli capture of Jerusalem, which evangelicals saw as “confirmation that Jews and Israel still had a role to play in God’s ordering of history,”²⁵ the Jerusalem Conference on

U.S. Jews,” *Jerusalem Post*, 16 November 2001, 9B; Tom Jenney, “Easter in Palestine: Letter From Gaza and the West Bank,” *Chronicles*, October 1999, 38-40.

21 Ernest R. Sandeen, “Toward a Historical Interpretation of The Origins of Fundamentalism,” in Martin E. Marty, ed. *Modern American Protestantism and Its World*, vol. 10 “Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism” (Munich and New York: K.G. Saur, 1993), 27.

22 Yaakov Ariel. *On Behalf of Israel: American Fundamentalist Attitudes Toward Jews, Judaism, and Zionism, 1865-1945* (Brooklyn, New York: Carlson Publishing, 1991), 12; Donald Wagner, “Evangelicals and Israel: Theological Roots of a Political Alliance,” *The Christian Century*, 4 November 1998, 1021; Timothy P. Weber, “How Evangelicals Became Israel’s Best Friend,” *Christianity Today*, 5 October 1998, 45.

23 <http://www.raptureready.com/rap2.html> (Accessed: April 4, 2005) (On this date the rapture index was listed as 154); See also, Bill Moyers, “There is No Tomorrow,” *Star Tribune*, 30 January 2005; Todd Strandberg, “The Iraq War Has Little Effect on the Rapture Index,” *Christianity Today*, 24 March 2003. See also, Bill Moyers, “Welcome to Doomsday,” *New York Review of Books*, vol. 52, no. 5, March 24, 2005.

24 Paul C. Merkley. *The Politics of Christian Zionism 1891-1948* (London: Frank Cass, 1998), 64.

25 Gerald McDermott, “Evangelicals and Israel: A Conversation with Gerald R. McDermott,” *Center Conversations*, no. 25, November 2005 (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public

Biblical Prophecy was billed as the “first conference of its kind since A.D. 59”—the first assembly of Christ’s Apostles.

After being welcomed by Israel founder and former Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, conference co-chairman and theologian Carl F.H. Henry, the “Dean”²⁶ of American evangelical Christian theologians, celebrated “the regathering of Israel from the ends of the earth” as a fulfillment of prophecy.²⁷ To his credit, Westminster Theological Seminary President Edmund P. Clowney challenged prominent evangelicals such as W.A. Criswell, Harold J. Ockenga, John F. Walvoord and other dispensationalists at the conference who argued that the temple of Jerusalem would have to be rebuilt as a precondition for the return of Jesus Christ, by insisting that no temple needed to be rebuilt because “Christ is the temple.”²⁸ Clowney’s doubts about the entire venture were noted in a *Newsweek* magazine article about the conference.²⁹

By describing the strength of Christian communities among Palestinians, Smith has powerfully appealed to the consciences of all people of goodwill. My one quibble with his article is his blanket description of turn of the twentieth-century Islamic thinkers Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Egyptian Jurist Muhammad ‘Abduh as Islamic nationalists, when Afghani and especially ‘Abduh advocated somewhat modern forms of political and economic liberalism. As Islam experts Karen Armstrong, Antony Black, Paul L. Heck, and Carolyn Fleur-Loban have described, ‘Abduh’s thought provides valuable and inspiring resources for contemporary inter-faith and international political discussions.³⁰ Reinhard Schulze, moreover, has

Policy Center, 2003), 5.

26 Michael Foust, “Carl F.H. Henry, ‘Dean’ of Evangelical Theologians, Dies at 90,” *Baptist Press News*, 9 December 2003. <http://www.sbc Baptist Press.org/bpnews.asp?Id=17234> (Accessed: April 5, 2005).

27 Carl F.H. Henry, “Jesus Christ and the Last Days,” in Carl F.H. Henry, ed. *The Prophecy in the Making* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Creation House, 1971), 181. Carl F. H. Henry, *Conversations with Carl Henry: Christianity for Today* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), 117, 188; Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. VI “God Who Stands and Stays,” (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1983), 489.

28 Edmund P. Clowney, “The Final Temple,” in Carl F.H. Henry, ed. *The Prophecy in the Making* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Creation House, 1971), 28.

29 “Prophets in Jerusalem,” *Newsweek*, 28 June 1971, 62.

30 Karen Armstrong, “Was It Inevitable?” in James E. Hoge, Jr. and Gideon Rose, eds. *How Did This Happen: Terrorism and the New War* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001), 68-69; Antony Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought: From the Prophet to the Present*

documented how ‘Abduh “inveighed against the political programs of Islamic nationalists in Egypt.”³¹

President George W. Bush said in his recent State of the Union Address that “The goal of two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace is within reach, and America will help them achieve that goal.”³² Hopefully Robert O. Smith’s important study will promote the goal of greater Middle East and world peace. Smith has provided a valuable resource for Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religious leaders who seek reconciliation. Whenever people talk to one another and take active steps toward justice, humanity moves closer toward the greater realization of peace.

(New York: Routledge, 2001), 304-305; Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, *Islamic Societies in Practice* 2nd ed. (Gainesville, Florida: Univ. Press of Florida, 2004), 228 (“The liberal tradition is one whose current ideas can be traced to the writings of the great Egyptian jurist Muhammad ‘Abduh[.]”); Paul L. Heck, “Religious Renewal in Syria: the Case of Muhammad al-Habash,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* Vol. 15, No. 2 (April 2004): 185-207. See also, Muhammad ‘Abduh “Laws Should Change in Accordance with the Conditions of Nations and The Theology of Unity,” in Charles Kurzman, ed. *Modernist Islam, 1840-1940: A Sourcebook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 50.

31 Reinhold Schulze. *A Modern History of the Islamic World* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 30.

32 George W. Bush, “State of the Union, 2 February 2005” <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/02/20050202-11.html> (Accessed: June 4, 2006).